

The nest of the Mountain Firetail *Oreostruthus fuliginosus* (Estrildidae) in Papua New Guinea

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The Mountain Firetail *Oreostruthus fuliginosus* is a large (13 cm long) and stout olive-brown estrildid finch with the sides of its breast, flanks, lower rump and upper tail coverts blood red and a bill colour that is variable but is basically blackish-red above and dull reddish below. It is found in the high mountains of the Central Ranges of the island of New Guinea at altitudes between 2200 and 3650 m, more usually above 2800 m, where it occurs singly or in pairs and sometimes in small groups in gaps in montane forest, along road edges and at the timberline. A bulky, domed, nest containing 2 young of this species was found in mid-April above 2700 m on Mt Albert Edward (Donaghey 1968), but almost no details were given. Nothing else of the biology of this interesting monotypic species is known save that it eats grass seeds, fruits and insects and may occur deep in forest as well as at its edge (Rand & Gilliard 1967, Goodwin 1982, Beehler *et al.* 1986). For detailed descriptions of morphology and distributions the reader is referred to the above sources.

Our incidental observations were made during other ornithological research in the Tari Gap forests (05°57'S, 143°10'E) of the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea at an altitude of c. 2650 m during the periods 8 September–29 October 1986, 14 October–5 December 1987 and 19 December 1988–10 February 1989 (Frith & Frith 1987, 1988a,b,c, 1989). The habitat here is mossy mixed beech forest (Saunders 1965) with abundant Pandanus Palms *Pandanus tectorius* in the canopy and subcanopy (see plate in Frith & Frith 1988c).

At 09.10 on 11 September 1986 a Mountain Firetail was seen flying with a piece of long fine nest material in its bill into the 10.7 m high (out of reach) crown centre of a Pandanus Palm situated on a steep ridge well within undisturbed dense forest.

At 08.00 on 22 October 1987 a Mountain Firetail was seen flying with a dead leaf in its bill from the forest/grassland edge into a 6.7 m high Pandanus Palm crown centre to add it to a globular nest, which could be seen to have a mossy top, but which could not be more closely examined.

On 31 December 1988 at 13.30 a nest was found placed between the frond bases of a Pandanus Palm crown 6.1 m above ground, the palm being 10 m into undisturbed forest from the edge of adjacent subalpine grassland. This nest contained the dried, mummified, body of a nestling with wing flight feathers and rump feathers out of pin, enabling us to identify it as a Mountain Firetail. The condition of green ferns on the outside of this nest indicated that it had been disused for no more than several weeks. Plate 3a shows the left side of this nest relative to the entrance, with the mummified nestling placed outside the entrance, and Plate 3b shows the side, or end, of the nest with the entrance hole (50 mm

diameter). Plate 4a shows the nest viewed from vertically above (note that the left side is only sparsely covered by external 'decoration' (see below) because it was built hard up against the broad palm frond bases); Plate 4b is the same view but the nest roof has been cut through its length from above the entrance hole to the far end of the chamber and then pulled apart to show the composition of the roof in section and the egg chamber floor. The rear of the nest chamber roof was 50 mm thick, and just above and within the entrance hole it was 35 mm thick. The bulky and substantial rugby football-shaped nest consists of 2 fairly discrete parts, a dense and compact inner nest and a looser, sparser outer covering of predominantly green 'decoration'. The inner nest structure consists of numerous long grass blades, which were dry and broad, with a few dry leaves (up to 130 × 52 mm in size) and dry, long and narrow ginger plant leaves (up to 210 × 35 mm). The lining of the egg chamber floor consisted simply of smaller and finer grass blade pieces. There were no feathers or feather traces at all, but it is possible that any feather lining had been removed, though unlikely, since the presence of the mummified nestling rather excludes any disturbance of the nest. Immediately on the outside of the inner nest were numerous large pieces of dry Pandanus Palm fronds and dry leaves and fern frond pinnae with dry, long lengths of straw-like grass blades loosely and sparsely woven about the entire structure. Immediately outside this layer was the external 'decoration' of much fresh, green 'comb-toothed' fern fronds, some small filmy-fern fronds, a few bits of green moss and a good deal of fine and supple brown-yellow epiphytic orchid stems, one or two of which still had a few small fresh green leaves attached. The word 'decoration' is not used literally, as the external fresh green vegetation may be cryptic in function or have some other significance.

The above nest of the Mountain Firetail is unlike those of its closest relatives the firetail finches of the genus *Emblema*, including *Zonaeginthus* (Goodwin 1982), in being much more substantial, more elongate than round, of far larger and coarser materials and, in addition, covered externally with fresh green ferns and mosses common to its nesting habitat. The nest entirely lacks an entrance tube, unlike all other firetails except the divergent Painted Finch *E. picta* (Immelmann 1982, Goodwin 1982), and was not built into surrounding branches and foliage but was built upon and between the bases of Pandanus Palm fronds, with which tree the Mountain Firetail appears to have a close nesting association, at least in the Tari Gap area.

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First specimens of *Drymophila devillei* from Colombia

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Hilty & Brown (1986) note the occurrence of the Striated Antwren *Drymophila devillei* in northern Ecuador and suggest that it might occur in adjacent Colombia in Putumayo or Amazonas. The Field Museum of Natural History contains 2 unpublished specimens of *D. devillei* from Putumayo that confirm this prediction. One, a male, was collected by Arturo Pazos on 7 October 1967 at Guascayaco. This locality was not located by Paynter & Traylor (1981), but was thought to be close to Mocoa (1°09'S, 76°37'W). The other specimen is a female collected by Kjell von Sneider. The tag now accompanying the bird gives no date and only 'Putumayo' as a locality. Based on the collector's number and the specimen's presence in a collection of birds that are otherwise all from San Antonio Guamuez, it appears that this specimen was probably obtained at San Antonio Guamuez (0°31'N, 76°45'W) on 30 October 1969. Incidentally Fitzpatrick & Willard (1982) reported other significant records in von Sneider's collection from San Antonio Guamuez, including other first records from Colombia of *Deconychura stictolaema*, *Rhegmatorhina melanosticta* and *Ramphotrigon fuscicauda*.

D. devillei is primarily a bird of bamboo thickets (Parker 1982). It is therefore not surprising that von Sneider obtained several other bamboo-favouring species at this site, including *Monasa flavirostris*, *Automolus melanopezus*, *Neoctantes niger* and *Ramphotrigon fuscicauda*.

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